

porque se fastidiaba [Ifigenia. *The Diary of a Young Lady Who Wrote Because She was Bored*] (1924) and *Las memorias de Mamá Blanca*, were both set in Venezuela but written from a 'European' point of view. The first describes the difficulty experienced by a young lady who finds herself unable to settle down in provincial, backward Caracas after a period in Europe. The second is based on her childhood memories of life on a paternalistically-run sugar-cane plantation. She shows herself unashamedly nostalgic for the old plantation life which she describes as a kind of paradise ruled by the good-natured 'Mama Blanca'.

Nuestra situación social en aquellos tiempos primitivos era, pues, muy semejante a la de Adán y Eva, cuando, señores absolutos del mundo, salieron inocentes y desnudos de entre las manos de Dios. Sólo que nosotros seis teníamos varias ventajas sobre ellos dos. Una de esas ventajas consistía en tener a Mamá, quien, dicho sea imparcialmente, con sus veinticuatro años, sus seis niñas y sus batas llenas de volantes era un encanto. Otra ventaja no menos agradable era la de desobedecer impunemente comiéndonos a escondidas, mientras Avelyn almorraba, el mayor número posible de guayabas sin que Dios nos arrojara del Paraíso, cubriéndonos de castigos y de maldiciones.*

Apart from the mention of the *guayabas*, there is little indication here that we are in Venezuela; the reference to the Garden of Eden and the Fall places the extract firmly in a Western tradition.

THE PLATE REGION

In the Plate region, the regionalist novel could draw on a long-standing tradition of gaucho literature as well as on the more recent post-Modernist writing in which poets and prose writers had turned to rural life. Though nature was not so threatening as in Venezuela or Colombia, nevertheless there were still regions where she was untamed and where only the hardy pioneer could survive. One such was Misiones, a northern tropical region along the Paraná bordered by Brazil and Paraguay. It is the area which provides the setting for some of the best regional short stories of Latin America—those of Horacio Quiroga.

* Our social situation in those primitive times was very similar to that of Adam and Eve when, absolute lords of the earth, they went out innocent and naked from the hands of God. Only we six had many advantages over those two. One of these advantages was Mama, who, speaking objectively, was delightful, with her six children, her frilly dresses and her twenty-four years. Another no less delightful advantage was that of being able to disobey without punishment and secretly: while Avelyn was lunching to eat the greatest possible number of *guayabas* without God ever casting us out of Paradise and covering us with punishments and curses.

Horacio Quiroga (1878-1937)

Quiroga was born in Salto in Uruguay and first wrote under the influence of the Modernists (especially Lugones) and also under that of Edgar Allan Poe. However, from the first, he showed an interest in the human personality in extreme or abnormal situations. This interest might have led him to Paris and the Decadents and, indeed, he did spend a few months in the French capital, only to find that the 'bohemian' life was not for him. On his return to Montevideo he published a volume of Modernist poetry, *Los arrecifes de coral* [*The Coral Reefs*] (1902), and he had begun to write stories in the manner of Poe, when a bizarre accident occurred which determined the course of his future writing. He accidentally killed one of his best friends when examining a gun, and had to go to live in Buenos Aires. Here he became a frequent visitor to Lugones's house and Lugones encouraged him to join an expedition to the northern territory of Misiones. Thus Quiroga came upon a part of the world where the individual, in his lonely struggle against nature, lived a life of dramatic intensity. He returned to the tropics to settle there and lived first in the Chaco and then in Misiones.

An essential factor in good regionalist literature is that the natural environment should be more than a setting for a human drama. The great regional novels, *La vorágine*, *Canaima*, *Don Segundo Sombra*, are those in which the human drama and the environment are inseparable. This is also true of Quiroga's best stories. From his early model, Poe, he had learned to concentrate on human personalities at breaking-point. After settling in the tropics, he began to write stories in which individuals found themselves in extreme danger or hardship, for people tended to show their real worth when natural hazards enabled them to display qualities that would otherwise have lain dormant. In *Cuentos de amor, de locura y de muerte* [*Stories of Love, Madness and Death*] (1917), *Anaconda* (1921), *El salvaje* [*The Savage*] (1920), *Los desterrados* [*The Exiles*] (1926), the situations are often as bizarre as those of Poe, but they arise out of the combination of human weakness and carelessness, accident and a pitiless natural environment.

In both the Chaco and Misiones, man cannot control nature. He can only study the environment and hope to survive by pitting his courage, tenacity and resourcefulness against the overwhelming natural hazards. An accident or a moment of carelessness can change a normal working day into a fierce struggle for life. It was this that fascinated Quiroga. Nowhere else could he have found situations in

which chance or accident, human will and natural force were all to play their part. Even the best human beings have defects which an accident can convert into tragic flaws.

A great majority of Quiroga's stories, then, follow a similar pattern. The protagonist is never an intellectual. He is usually a pioneer, a farmer or labourer in the Misiones or Chaco going about his daily work. The accident happens: a snake bites him, the river waters rise, a long period of drought alters the conditions of life. Suddenly he becomes a lonely man fighting for life.

Two of Quiroga's best stories follow this pattern: 'A la deriva' [Drifting] and 'Un hombre muerto' [A Dead Man]. In both these stories, a fatal accident occurs in the first few lines and the protagonist dies at the end. The death struggle forms the only theme or plot. But in neither story is the death quite 'accidental'. In 'A la deriva' a man bitten by a deadly snake paddles frantically down-river to get help, but he had quarrelled with his nearest neighbour. His cries for help are not answered, and he floats helplessly away between the dark cliffs along the Paraná. The snake-bite was an accident, but the man had in a sense contributed to his own death when, years before, he had quarrelled with his nearest neighbour. In 'El hombre muerto', a man who is tired after a day's work in the banana plantations slips and falls on a machete knife. The entire drama consists of the attempts of the man's 'I' to retain its hold on reality until the final disintegration of the personality when the plantation, 'his' knife and 'his' horse cease to be 'his'. But again the accident arises out of the man's character. Obsessed with clearing his banana plantation, he had neglected to see to the handle of his knife which needed replacing and was overtired when the accident took place; and there is a certain dramatic irony in the fact that the plantation of which he is so proud indirectly brings about his death. Here, for instance, is a fine passage in which the dying man watches the almost motionless leaves on 'his' plantation:

El hombre resiste, ¡es tan imprevisible ese horror! Y piensa: ¡Es una pesadilla, esto es! ¿Qué ha cambiado? Nada. Y mira: ¿No es acaso ese bananal su bananal? ¿No viene todas las mañanas a limpiarlo? ¿Quién lo conoce como él? Ve perfectamente el bananal, muy raleado, y las anchas hojas desnudas por el viento. Pero ahora no se mueven... Es la calma de mediodía; pronto deben de ser las doce.

Por entre los bananos, allá arriba, el hombre ve desde el duro suelo el techo rojo de su casa. A la izquierda entrevé el monte y la capuera de canelas. No alcanza a ver más, pero sabe muy bien que a sus espaldas está el camino al puerto nuevo, y que en la dirección de su cabeza, allá abajo, yace en el fondo del valle el Paraná dormido como un lago. Todo, todo, exactamente como siempre: el sol

de fuego, el aire vibrante y solitario, los bananos inmóviles, el alambrado de postes muy gruesos y altos que pronto tendrá que cambiar... ¡Muerto! Pero ¿es posible?*

And we see how, though dying, the man still assumes that he is owner of the property, how his mind still cannot adjust to the idea of death but goes on making plans for the future, for repairing the wire fence. At the same time, notice that the author never presents any thought too complex for the mind of a simple farmer.

Though Quiroga is not directly concerned with society in his stories, criticism of social organisation is often implicit. For Quiroga, all man-made institutions are fallible, fragile and ultimately unimportant, when set beside the mightiness of nature but he expresses this view indirectly, often by showing the failure of human organisation when confronted with natural hazards. In 'Los fabricantes de carbón' [The Charcoal Burners], two men plan to set up a charcoal-burning furnace in Misiones and the story ironically comments on their careful calculations—the structure of the furnace, temperatures, etc.—and the natural and human elements which defy calculation. There is thus a conflict between human reason and will which seeks to plan, structure and control the environment, and nature which defies such control. This also helps to explain why Quiroga should so often choose animals as the protagonists of his stories, since their instinctual knowledge and acts are totally opposed to the willed and motivated actions of human beings. This conflict is the subject of 'Anaconda', a story in which the snakes rise up to fight a war to the death with a group of men in charge of a laboratory which manufactures snake serum. The snakes instinctively defend the natural order. Men seek to destroy this in order to bring nature under their control. In this story, the humans win a victory, but usually defiance of nature brings punishment,

* The man resists: this horror is so unexpected. And he thinks: It is a nightmare, that is what it is. What had changed? Nothing. And he looked. Isn't this banana plantation his plantation? Doesn't he come here every day to clear the ground? Who knows it as he does? He can see his plantation perfectly; very sparse—and the broad leaves naked from the wind. But now they are not moving. It is he midday calm; soon it will probably be twelve o'clock.

Between the banana plants, up there, the man sees the red roof of his house from the hard ground. To the left, he glimpses the bush and the cinnamon fence. He cannot see more, but he knows quite well that behind him lies the road to the new port and that in the direction of his head, down below, the Paraná, calm as a lake, lies in the depths of the valley. Everything, everything is exactly as always; the burning sun, the vibrating, solitary air, the motionless banana plants, the wire fence with its very thick high posts that he will soon have to change.

Dead! Is it possible?

as in 'La insolación' [Sun-stroke] where Mr Jones drives himself pitilessly to clear his cotton plantation during a hot spell. His dogs instinctively realise that they must conserve their energy and rest in the shade whereas their master kills himself from sunstroke in his anxiety to get a job done. In stories such as this, nature is no passive element but an actively destructive force, a threat to human identity. Here, for instance, is Mr Jones attempting to walk through the cane-brake in the burning sun:

... Llegó al riacho y se internó en el pajonal, el diluviano pajonal del Saladito, que ha crecido, secado y retoñado desde que hay paja en el mundo, sin conocer fuego. Las matas arqueadas en bóveda a la altura del pecho, se entregaban en bloques macizos. La tarea de cruzarlo, sería ya en día fresco, era muy dura a esa hora. Mister Jones lo atravesó, sin embargo, braceando entre la paja restallante y polvorienta por el barro que dejaban las crecientes, ahogado de fatiga y acres vahos de nitratos.*

The human figure struggling across the cane-brake seems almost derisory in comparison with the nature he is struggling against—in this case a mass of plants that have grown untouched for centuries. In this passage one cannot talk of a natural 'background'; here as in other stories natural hazards take on the role of the Fates in the Greek drama, visiting on the human protagonist the punishment his own nature has destined him for.

Though social protest has no place in Quiroga's stories, he does not avoid stories about economic exploitation. His attitude towards social organisation inevitably led him to see the dehumanising effect of the semi-slave conditions in which many labourers worked, and several of his most striking stories illustrate this. 'Los mensús' is about two *mensuales*—labourers hired on a monthly basis—who contract debts in a company store, are forced to work off the debts on a plantation where they are ruthlessly driven to work even when ill, and who escape. One of them dies during the escape bid, the other finds his way to the river port, only to contract debts and start the same fatal trajectory once again. In 'Una bofetada' [A Blow], Quiroga tells a monstrous story of hatred between a foreman and an Indian labourer.

* He reached the stream and went into the cane-brake, the antediluvian cane-brake of Saladito which has grown, dried out and resprouted for as long as there ever has been cane in the world and without ever being burned. The clumps, arched in a dome chest-high, were tangled in solid blocks. The task of crossing, difficult even on a cool day, was very hard at this hour. Mr Jones crossed it, nevertheless, swimming between the cracking dusty cane over the clay left by the floods, gasping with fatigue and the bitter vapour of nitrates.

The foreman slaps the labourer, who harbours his hatred for years until circumstances put the foreman in his power. The Indian manages to disarm him of his gun and whip, and proceeds to beat the man to death along the lonely tracks between the plantations. Often in Quiroga's stories the landscape has symbolic features, as in the following passage:

Korner no se movía más. El mensú cortó entonces las amarras de la jangada y subiéndolo en la canoa, ató un cabo a la popa de la almadía y paleó vigorosamente.

Por leve que fuera la tracción sobre la inmensa mole de vigas, el esfuerzo inicial bastó. La jangada viró insensiblemente, entró en la corriente y el hombre cortó entonces el cabo.

El sol había entrado hacía rato. El ambiente calcinado dos horas antes, tenía ahora una frescura y quietud fúnebres. Bajo el cielo aún verde, la jangada derivaba girando, entraba en la sombra transparente de la costa paraguayana, para resurgir de nuevo a la distancia, sólo una línea negra ya.*

The dead foreman has reached the end of life's journey. The *peon* he had once beaten is now triumphant but no emotion is shown other than the quiet preparations to float the body downstream. All the emotional content of the passage lies in the description of the twilight and the boat floating away down the river. The heat has died down, the hours of torment are over, the peace and coolness of death have come. It is precisely this objectification of the emotions that gives the story a power that many orthodox social-protest stories do not have. For here we are shown how men behave under humiliation and oppression and we are shown this without rhetoric.

Quiroga's most bizarre and probably his best collection is *Los desterrados* [The Exiles], particularly the section he called 'Los tipos' which gives sketches of characters whom he had known in Misiones. Here we meet the dregs of humanity, drunkards and dipsomaniacs who have come to end their lives away from social censure. These 'real-life' stories have more horror in them than the fantasy stories Quiroga wrote under the influence of Poe. One of the characters, for instance, dies of exposure after drinking wood alcohol out of a lamp; another dies in a dipsomaniac delirium; a labourer disappears and all that is ever found of him are his boots hanging from a tree. These

* Korner no longer moved. The *mensú* then cut the ropes of the raft and getting into the canoe, he tied an end to the stern of the raft and paddled vigorously.

Despite the slowness of the drag on the immense mass of logs, the initial impulse was enough. The raft turned slightly, entered the current and then the man cut the end.

The sun had gone in some time before. The burning atmosphere of two hours before had now a funeral freshness and quiet. Beneath the sky which was still green, the raft drifted and turned round; it entered into the transparent shadow of the Paraguayan coast to reappear again in the distance as a mere black line.

lonely desperate men were probably not unlike Quiroga himself after the loss of his first wife, who committed suicide in 1915, or the Quiroga of later years, ignored by the younger generation of writers, poor and almost friendless, who returned from Misiones to Buenos Aires ill with cancer. Characteristically, he killed himself before the disease reached its last stages.

Quiroga's importance is not only his contribution to regional writing but also his contribution to the art of the short story. His *Decálogo del perfecto cuentista*¹ stresses the need for economy and intensity and shows that he was conscious of the scope and limitations of the genre. He can certainly be counted one of the Latin-American masters of the genre.

Ricardo Güiraldes

The greatest regional novel of this century is *Don Segundo Sombra* by Ricardo Güiraldes (1886-1927) and it is regional in the sense that Quiroga's stories were regional, in that the pampa is an essential element in the human drama.

Güiraldes came from a family of wealthy landowners, and spent part of his childhood in Europe, part on the family *estancia* where he lived with gauchos and met the man who was to become the model for Don Segundo. The scenes of his childhood—Europe and the pampa—were to play significant if conflicting roles in his development. His first writings, published in 1915, were the poems and prose poems of *El cenorro de cristal* [*The Glass Bell*], and stories, the *Cuentos de muerte y de sangre* [*Stories of Death and Blood*]; some of these were anecdotes which illustrated the character of historical figures such as Rosas or Urquiza. These first publications had no success with the Argentine public although they contained the seeds of his later and more successful works. They reveal not a simple 'back to nature' attitude but a religious need for spiritual equilibrium and peace evocatively stated in the brief poem, 'Quietud' [Quietude].

Tarde, tarde,
Cae la tarde,
larga, larga
se alarga
En derrumbe silencioso
como mirada en un pozo.*

* Evening, evening. Evening falls, long, long, it grows drowsy. In silent decline like a glance in a well.

The tension in Güiraldes's mind between the Europeanised way of life his education had accustomed him to and the stoic, manly qualities developed in the pampa was first expressed in a novel, *Raucha* (1917), which was based closely on his personal experience. The story is of a young man's disillusionment with Europe and his return to Argentina where, back on the *estancia*, he experiences a sense of inner peace such as he had never known when away from home. This is the significant passage:

Raucha piensa cómo quiso ser todo menos lo que era. Su chiripá,¹ sólo desprendido de la faja, se habrá envilecido en el polvo de caminos extranjeros.

Raucha se sienta bajo un sauce, cerca de una tosca,² donde el agua habla de misterios serenos.

Un pato silbón pasa perforando noche con gritos agudos.

Raucha inefablemente quieto, se duerme de espaldas, los brazos abiertos, crucificado de calma sobre su tierra de siempre.*

Though he describes Raucha as 'serenely crucified' this is not a picture of agony but of bliss.

It is obvious that Güiraldes had serious doubts as to the quality of the progress achieved by Western civilisation. In his *Rosaura* (1918), a simple, idyllic love story, the novel ends with the heroine's death under a train which symbolises a type of progress that destroys simpler more traditional forms of life. And it is clear too that Güiraldes felt that attainment of inner peace and maturity was the individual's main task in life. This conviction led him to take an interest in Eastern religions which emphasised meditation, and he had paid a visit to the East in 1910. The recording of inner experience is also uppermost in *Xamata*, a love story published in 1923 and set on board a ship sailing to Jamaica. The union of the lovers brings them an experience of having transcended the individuation principle similar to that of the mystics:

Tengo de pronto la certeza de que el infinito está presente. Lo veo y abrazo en mí, con una facultad momentánea más fuerte que toda razón. Se definitivamente lo que es. A pesar del desenlace forzoso de mi vida, comprendo que he vencido la muerte y el tiempo en ese instante en que, fuera de mi limitación individual,

* Raucha thinks how he had wanted to be less than he was. His *chiripá*, undone at the waist, must have been soiled in the dust of foreign roads.

Raucha sits down under a willow tree near a *tosca* in which the water speaks of calm mysteries.

A whistling duck passes by, perforating the night with shrill cries.

Raucha, ineffably quiet, sleeps on his back, his arms wide open, serenely crucified upon the eternal earth.